

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE A-20

NEW YORK TIMES

9 NOVEMBER 1981

Listen to the C.I.A. Watchmen

Point: The United States cannot be secure if our spies can't use their covert methods on the home front as well as abroad.

Counterpoint: We cannot be truly free if we let them ply their methods of infiltration, surveillance and manipulation on law-abiding citizens.

There are two issues embedded in this argument. One is where — where these competing interests should be balanced. The other, much more important, is how — the process of interplay between the C.I.A. and its Congressional overseers. The process makes the agency and the White House squirm, but it is the only hope for the wise use of intelligence. Therefore, when the Congressional monitors sound an alarm, it behooves the White House and the intelligence community to listen.

Congress can draw a line, as in 1947 when it created the C.I.A., against domestic spying. But that line requires constant policing. It is heartening to see that the watchmen are awake.

A bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee, and the Democrats, at least, on the House counterpart, have sternly warned President Reagan against relaxing the curbs on domestic C.I.A. activity, as proposed in the latest draft of an executive order. Why, they ask, does the Administration want to stir up old anxieties, risk reviving the abuses Congress has documented and distract from the main task of improving foreign intelligence?

No one expects any Administration to love the idea of Congressional supervision — and this one certainly does not. Edwin Meese, the President's counselor, reviles criticism of the new order as propaganda from former staff members of "Frank Church's infamous intelligence committee that was so destructive of our intelligence authorities some years ago." Infamous? Destructive? The Church committee was the body that nailed the C.I.A. for collecting dossiers on thousands of law-abiding Americans. Its report helped bring some civilian control and Congressional oversight.

Mr. Meese also denies that the proposed executive order would make domestic spying easier. That denial is belied by every sentence and paragraph of the proposal. The Carter Administration's 1978 order prohibited infiltrating or trying to influence domestic groups; the Reagan order would permit them if the Attorney General approved. The Reagan version would subject American international businessmen to surveillance at home or abroad, not because they're dangerous but because they know things the C.I.A. wants to know.

The President has the raw power to sign this order despite the advice of the C.I.A.'s watchmen. But that kind of insularity only underscores the danger of an unchecked spy service turned inward. Mr. Reagan needs to join the watchmen in a process that can make Americans both secure and free.